

**Amendments to the Claims:**

This listing of claims will replace all prior versions, and listings, of claims in the application:

**Listing of Claims:**

1. (Currently Amended) A flexible riser system for a loading system for transferring hydrocarbons between a sea bed installation and a vessel floating at a sea surface, comprising:

a flexible riser being configured to be lowered to a submerged, protected position below the sea surface and disconnected from the vessel when the riser is in a non-operative position; and

protection means for protecting the riser from impact when the riser is connected to the vessel, the protection means being submerged and covering at least an upper part of the riser when the riser is submerged and connected to the vessel, the protecting means being formed of a plurality of separate units suspended from each other, the separate units arranged to be movable in transverse direction with respect to the riser, the protecting means further being provided with a stretching means or a tensioning means attached to a lower end of the protection means, the protection means being configured to retract to a protected position below the sea surface together with the riser when the riser is in the non-operative position,

wherein the riser in the vicinity of the stretching or tensioning means is provided with a collar designed to reduce detrimental impact of the stretching or tensioning means on the riser caused by relative movement of the stretching or tensioning means with respect to the riser.

2. (Previously Presented) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 1, wherein the riser protection means is temporarily suspended from the vessel.

3. (Previously Presented) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 1, wherein the riser protection means is suspended from a submerged turret loading buoy.

4. (Previously Presented) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 1, wherein the stretching or tensioning means is formed by an annular body surrounding the flexible riser.

5. (Previously Presented) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 1, wherein the stretching or tensioning means is moored to the sea bed by means of wires.

6. (Previously Presented) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 1, wherein the stretching or tensioning means at the lower end of its interior surface is provided with a curved surface opposing an outer surface of the collar designed to reduce detrimental impact or wear and tear on the riser caused by relative movement of the stretching means.

7. (Cancelled).

8. (Previously Presented) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 1, wherein the stretching or tensioning means are suspended by means of chains or wires carrying the riser protection.

9. (Previously Presented) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 1, wherein the riser protection means is formed by a plurality of separate hollow elements, each being suspended by means of chains or lines.

10. (Previously Presented) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 9, wherein the hollow elements are truncated and conical with a smaller upper diameter and a larger lower diameter or vice versa.

11. (Previously Presented) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 9, wherein the hollow elements forming the riser protection means are stacked on top of each other when in a retracted position.

12. (Previously Presented) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 1, wherein the riser protection means is completely retractable into a sheltered position on the vessel.

13. (Previously Presented) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 9, wherein the hollow elements are provided with internally coating or friction reducing layer in order to minimize friction or load impact between the riser and the protection means, enabling the riser to move freely within the riser protection means.

14. (Previously Presented) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 9, wherein each hollow element at its wider edge is provided with a stacking ridge enabling the hollow element to be stacked on a next element.

15. (Previously Presented) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 10, wherein the hollow elements forming the riser protection means are stacked on top of each other when in a retracted position.

16. (Previously Presented) A flexible riser system for a loading system according to claim 1, wherein when the protection means is retracted to a protected position below the sea surface together with the riser when the riser is in the non-operative position, the protection means is detached from the vessel.

17. (Previously Presented) A loading system for transferring hydrocarbons between a sea bed installation and a vessel floating at a sea surface, comprising:

a vessel floating at a sea surface; and

a flexible riser system comprising:

a flexible riser being configured to be lowered to a submerged, protected position below the sea surface and disconnected from the vessel when the riser is in a non-operative position; and

protection means connected to the vessel for protecting the riser from impact, the protection means being submerged below the vessel and covering at least an upper part of the riser, and terminating above the sea bed, the protection means being formed of a plurality of separate units suspended from each other and a stretching means or a tensioning means

arranged at a lower end of the protection means, the protection means being configured to retract to a protected position below the sea surface together with the riser when the riser is in the non-operative position.

18. (Previously Presented) A loading system according to claim 17, wherein the riser protection means is temporarily suspended from the vessel.

19. (Previously Presented) A loading system according to claim 17, wherein the riser protection means is suspended from a submerged turret loading buoy.

20. (Previously Presented) A loading system according to claim 17, wherein the stretching or tensioning means is formed by an annular body surrounding the flexible riser.

21. (Previously Presented) A loading system according to claim 17, wherein the stretching or tensioning means is moored to the sea bed by means of wires.

22. (Previously Presented) A loading system according to claim 17, wherein the stretching or tensioning means at the lower end of its interior surface is provided with a curved surface designed to reduce detrimental impact or wear and tear on the riser caused by relative movement of the stretching means.

23. (Previously Presented) A loading system according to claim 17, wherein the riser in the vicinity of the stretching or tensioning means is provided with a collar designed to reduce detrimental impact on the riser caused by relative movement of the stretching or tension means with respect to the riser.

24. (Previously Presented) A loading system according to claim 17, wherein the stretching or tensioning means is suspended by means of chains or wires carrying the riser protection.

25. (Previously Presented) A loading system according to claim 17, wherein the riser protection means is formed by a plurality of separate hollow elements, each being suspended by means of chains or lines.

26. (Previously Presented) A loading system according to claim 25, wherein the hollow elements are truncated and conical with a smaller upper diameter and a larger lower diameter or vice versa.

27. (Previously Presented) A loading system according to claim 25, wherein the hollow elements forming the riser protection means are stacked on top of each other when in a retracted position.

28. (Previously Presented) A loading system according to claim 17, wherein the riser protection means is completely retractable into a sheltered position on the vessel.

29. (Previously Presented) A loading system according to claim 25, wherein the hollow elements are provided with internally coating or friction reducing layer in order to minimize friction or load impact between the riser and the protection means, enabling the riser to move freely within the riser protection means.

30. (Previously Presented) A loading system according to claim 25, wherein each hollow element at its wider edge is provided with a stacking ridge enabling the hollow element to be stacked on a next element.

31. (Previously Presented) A loading system according to claim 26, wherein the hollow elements forming the riser protection means are stacked on top of each other when in a retracted position.

32. (Previously Presented) A loading system according to claim 17, wherein when the protection means is retracted to a protected position below the sea surface together with the riser when the riser is in the non-operative position, the protection means is detached from the vessel.

33. (Withdrawn) A method of operating a flexible riser system for a loading system for transferring hydrocarbons between a sea bed installation and a vessel floating at a sea surface, the flexible riser system having a flexible riser and a protection means formed of a plurality of separate units suspended from each other and a stretching means or a tensioning means, the method comprising:

transferring hydrocarbons between the sea bed installation and the vessel while the protection means is connected to the vessel and submerged below the vessel, such that the protection means covers at least an upper part of the riser and such that both the plurality of separate units and the stretching or tensioning means are disposed above the sea bed, the protection means arranged to protect the riser from impact.

34. (Withdrawn) The method of claim 33 further comprising:

retracting the protection means to a protected position below the sea surface together with the riser when the riser is not operating to transfer hydrocarbons between the sea bed installation and the vessel.